

If We Could Be Lovers by gaps42

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Summary:

When Max had said she would do anything for her best friend, she meant climb the highest mountain, swim the deepest sea, protect her from harm with only her fists and her wits; she hadn't been prepared to look Jane's terrifying father in the eye and lie about being deeply in love with her over Christmas yams. Especially since she wouldn't be lying.

A "We have to pretend to date over Christmas to get my parents off my back" f/f love story in three parts.

1. Chapter 1

Author's Note:

Are y'all sick of seeing my username in the elmax tag
yet *finger guns*

No one would be quicker to tell you than Max Mayfield that she was always raring for a fight. Quick-tempered and loyal to a fault, Max would jump at the first opportunity to defend her found family or just put any asshole in their place when they started getting too mouthy about their wrong opinion, and she relished any opportunity to unleash the anger she always had pent up in a tight ball at the pit of her stomach. Despite what her friends said, she didn't go looking for fights; she would not attack unprovoked, but any perceived slight against anyone she cared about and Max would appear, guns blazing, ready with a scathing word and raised fists.

Nothing brought this to light, Max thinks, lying belly-up on her best friend's bed, like Jane's father.

Jane paces beside the bed, hands wringing anxiously in front of her as she chews her lip. "I just need more time," she says, for the hundreth time in half an hour, and Max clenches her jaw to keep her mouth shut. "I'm already so far – I just need to keep up the facade for another year, and then I don't need to worry about him or his stupid money ever again, but if I promise anything – I'm close and I just need him to stop being suspicious, I just need him to think I'm still on the plan -"

Max covers her eyes with her hands. She's never met Jane's father, but the way her best friend acts after a simple phone call with him is all she needs to know about the man. He has a plan for her, an endless path of medical school and marriage and socialite parties and brand success, and none of it is Jane, but from what Max can tell her father thinks this is besides the point. Jane – her brilliant, witty, blindingly-bright Jane – was adopted for a purpose, and Dr. Brenner expects her to fulfill this purpose, and do it with a smile. She was the eleventh foster child he had adopted and invested in to create a perfect, successful, soulless offspring, and any variation on his

formula was not an option, let alone a discussion Jane could have with him. Max knows he would take away his money for tuition and Jane's luxurious private loft if she appeared to step a toe out of line, but she secretly thinks this is not what keeps her best friend going through the motions set for her; no one can understand better than Max the damaging, inherent need to earn approval from the very parent you resent, and she thinks this may be why they are best friends.

"I should have kept up with those stupid progress reports for him - I just need more *time*," Jane says, and her voice breaks a bit.

Jane has her own plan; she is taking psychology classes, excusing them away when her father receives her grades by saying they are standard for modern medical professionals, and she wants to become a therapist to help children in situations like hers. Her father, never having experienced human emotions himself, thinks of psychology as a "soft science" and helping other people as a "waste of Jane's talents," so Jane had played her part, funnelling his money into her future and giving him dutiful, strategically-phrased progress reports in his weekly phone calls. Her eyes shine when she talks about her plan, the blinding light inside of her Max fell in love with bursting from every pore as she plots out a future she built for herself by her own power, but one phone call from Dr. Brenner and she's muted, eyes downcast like she's trying to hide the whole universe behind them to make him happy. The holidays are the worst time for this, watching Jane methodically condense herself back down to the obedient doll her father had tried to mould her into her whole life in preparation for returning to his empty mansion, and Max grits her teeth to stop the barrage of violent threats against Dr. Brenner from escaping. Fury only makes Jane retreat further into herself, and empty threats are not what her best friend needs right now.

Max takes her hands off of her eyes to see Jane running both hands through her gelled hair, the short strands sticking up haphazardly and making Max's belly twinge despite her anger. "This is all Rebecca's fault," she complains.

Rebecca was the beautiful, well-bred, Political Science-major socialite Jane had been dating the last time she had made a progress-report phone call to her father. To Dr. Brenner, it had been a perfect match,

opening up important connections for Jane and checking off the “marriage by graduation” box on his to-do list for his adoptive daughter's life, but, like the rest of Jane's secret choices since starting college, their relationship had never been heading in the direction Dr. Brenner had wanted it to. Rebecca was also from a high-pressure, powerful family, and hooking up with Jane Brenner, secret rebel who dressed like Joan Jett and had learned how to throw a punch in the mosh pit of indie post-punk concerts, had been a thrill she'd eagerly taken up. Neither of them had been serious about the relationship, but it had been a good cover for both of their families, and Jane had been counting on it to get her through the next year under her father's thumb when Rebecca had, apropos nothing, announced that she was bored and run off with a proper socialite girl from her Political Science program. Jane hadn't exactly been heart-broken, but Max realizes now, lying on her bed and watching her pace so quickly she might actually wear a hole in the carpet, exactly what stressor has made Jane so emphatically opposed to real romantic relationships her whole life.

“He gave me time,” Jane is saying, grounding out every word, and Max realizes with a squeeze of her heart that she's losing her words again. Talking to her father makes her regress back into an almost child-like vocabulary, and Jane losing her words when Brenner isn't even there to talk over her makes Max so worried she sits up on the bed, crossing her legs and sticking her hands underneath her thighs so that she doesn't reach for her friend. “Out of time,” Jane continues, staring at her wringing hands. “He will give me to someone.”

“He can't do that,” Max says softly. Jane had confided in her that her father had told her if she couldn't find a suitable mate he would provide one, but it had always been he least of her worries about what Dr. Brenner could make Jane do, because it wasn't the 1800s and despite what Dr. Brenner clearly thought they weren't royalty. Jane shakes her head and sits on the edge of the bed, eyes downcast, and Max can't stop herself from reaching over to take her hands, ducking her head to try to chase her friend's gaze. “Hey. He can't.”

“He did,” Jane says softly. Her fingers weave through Max's, and Max's stomach flutters before she processes her friend's words.

“He – What?” She shifts to sit back on her heels, and instantly regrets it as Jane tries to pull her hands away at the unexpected movement. “Already? What do you mean, has he promised your hand or something?”

Jane's lip twitches, but there's no humor in her eyes when they meet Max's wide ones. “Business plan,” she says, allowing Max to possessively pull her hands back into the redhead's lap. “I take over his lab. Dean of Medical Science's daughter, my wife, gives me grants.”

Max's head spins. She has to consciously stop herself from crushing Jane's fingers with her own. “From the university here?” she asks, stupidly, because jealousy should be her last instinct in this situation, but she can't remember if she's ever met the Dean's daughter, or seen how pretty she was, and the ugly feeling was warring with her concern.

Jane shakes her head. “From back home.”

“Right.” Dr. Brenner's lab is in Indiana. Max looks down at Jane's slender hands enveloped in her own freckled ones, not sure how to process this information. “So he just – lined this up after he heard you broke up with Rebecca, or - ?”

“It was always the plan,” Jane says miserably. She's looking down at their hands, too, and Max strokes her thumb along the ridge of her knuckles soothingly. “He allowed me time to find someone of equal value to the lab if I could, but... Time's up.” She lifts one hand out of Max's and tucks her fingers into her palm to make a gun, pointing first at Max's forehead, then at her own. “Marriage by graduation,” she says softly.

“But that's *crazy*, Ellie.” Max had jokingly nick-named Jane “Ellie” after finding out about her father referring to her as “Eleven,” referencing her being his eleventh child. It was hard to explain in public, since Jane didn't exactly spread the story of her home life around campus, but when she used it privately it would always make Jane remember she was safe with her best friend. Now, Jane's lip twitches and she wiggles closer to Max on the bed, and Max ploughs on, encouraged. “He can't just sell you to this other girl to get science

grants. You're not even going to be a medical doctor. Hey, this can be part of your plan, you can date this girl and then once you don't need his money any more you don't have to go through with his marriage, either -"

But Jane is shaking her head, nervously-jiggling knee bouncing against Max's so that she feels the tremors through her whole body. "She will be there at Christmas," she says quietly. "No plausible deniability."

Max feels like the world is tilting on its axis; no wonder Jane is losing her words. Jane is walking right into the future she never wanted by walking through her father's front doors, and she has no more lies to keep him at bay. "I'm – You're not going to be getting *married* at Christmas, though, maybe you can talk to this girl, like you did Rebecca, and if she knows what's up – Do you know her, can you trust her not to tell you dad?"

"I d -" Jane starts to say something, but realization blooms on her face, like she's just figured out the secrets to the universe, and Max only comes back to herself when Jane starts smacking the backs of Max's hands with her own, swiveling on the bed to face Max eagerly. "Trust!" she says, beaming, and Max is still too dizzy from being so close to Jane's joy to do more than raise her eyebrows, suspicious even as she returns Jane's infectious smile irresistibly. "Max! You're a lesbian!"

"Yeah," Max says slowly, horror icy in her guts as she thinks, even though Jane looks thrilled at her own words, *This is it, she's figured out how I feel and she's never going to speak to me again* -

Jane laughs, and humiliation twists Max's heart before the taller girl ploughs on, "That's it! You're the one I trust! Plausible deniability!"

Jane is beaming at her, but Max frowns, running one hand through her tangled hair and trying to catch up to Jane's thought process after the roller coaster she'd just been on. Jane doesn't seem to hate her, so that crisis is averted, at least for now. "Um. Me being a lesbian is plausible deniability? What does that have to do with tr – Oh, no, no, no, Ellie. No."

Jane giggles, rolling effortlessly to her knees to match Max's stance. "It's the only way, Max," she says, now the one chasing Max's gaze with her own. "I just have to make it to graduation. You're the only one I trust to be there with me. I just need him to believe you're my girlfriend for a few days."

Max groans, rolling her head back on her shoulders to stare at the ceiling. "No, Ellie," she says, flattening her hands over her thighs so that Jane won't see them shaking. "That's not – that's insane. And I can't exactly compete with the Dean of Medical Science's daughter, he won't give a shit even if he does believe we're dating."

"We'll make up a backstory for you," Jane says, waving away her concerns like she's swatting a fly. "It doesn't matter who you are, for him, I just need you there. Not just to be my girlfriend. I need *you*, Max."

Her hands slide over Max's, and Max squeezes her eyes shut for a moment as she feels herself break. She lowers her head and opens her eyes to find Jane's huge brown ones peering at her hopefully, practically glowing with the light inside of her reignited, and she sighs.

"I'm so close, Max," Jane says, and her face is tensed with determination. "I can't go back under his thumb. I won't. But I can't do this without you."

Max winces. "This is a stupid idea," she tries, but her hands are already wrapping around Jane's in her lap.

Jane's beautiful features are aglow with hope. "It's not. *Please*, Max."

Max closes her eyes again, resigned, and brings their joined hands to her forehead. She wants to freeze this moment in her memory for when this all blows up in her face. *I'd do anything for you, Ellie.*

She opens her eyes, and, locked in Jane's blindingly-bright gaze, she doesn't regret it when she says, "Of course I'll do it."

2. Chapter 2

Notes for the Chapter:

Okay, it's technically not THAT long after midnight where I live so this isn't too late... God! I'm so sorry

Leaning against the front door, one foot propped up against the wood behind her, Max scrolls through her phone, mostly to look busy while she waits for Jane to pick her up. She can't wait inside, because all of her asshole housemates have taken it upon themselves to tell her how terrible an idea this is, like she doesn't already know, and she'd lost her temper and slammed the door in Lucas's face when he wouldn't stop insisting that if they wouldn't be so stupid and date *for real* then none of this would be a problem. She scowls at the thought, kicking the door a few times with her heel, and wishes she had her old skateboard to ride around until Jane showed up. Of course it was locked in her closet, which meant walking past all of her housemates's rooms and jumping back into a fight she was already having with herself in her own head, so she's grateful when she hears Jane's expensive car pulling smoothly into her driveway.

She picks up the handle of the shiny, expensive suitcase Mike lent her after Jane had forbidden her from bringing her old gym bag, and is just about to tug it down the steps when Jane bursts from the car, a blur of royal blue and pale white skin as she barrels towards Max. Bewildered, Max barely has time to throw her suitcase aside before she catches her friend, stumbling backwards and only preventing them from falling painfully onto the concrete steps by throwing one arm out to grab the post on the porch.

"Max," Jane sighs, and buries her face in Max's shoulder. Max had stumbled up a few of the steps, so they were the same height now, and Jane has to stand on her tip-toes to wrap herself around her friend. Max hopes they're both wearing enough layers that Jane doesn't feel her heart speed up.

"Yeah, that's me," Max says, and clears her throat. "Good on you for checking so thoroughly." Jane giggles and dis-attaches herself from Max, and her eyes are so bright and distracting Max doesn't process

the difference in her until they wander down Max's own body.

Max has seen her natural curls before, mornings after sleep-overs and during exams when Jane hasn't left her room in days and doesn't bother with her carefully-careless style, but she's never seen the sun gleam off of them, glowing deep auburn in the early-morning light, and the sight makes her throat close up dangerously, her fingers itching to run through the gentle waves like a moth drawn to a flame it knows will burn it. Jane's face is free of make-up except for light mascara and nude lipstick, her cheeks already pink from the wind, and her big brown eyes and porcelain doll-like features are such a contrast to her usual look that Max, who has spent more hours than she wants to admit to herself studying the curves and lines of Jane's face, almost wouldn't recognize her if she hadn't just pulled up in her own car. The smirk which twists her pale lips up on one side is just as devastating with her new look, however, and Max can't help the nervous clench in her belly as she watches Jane take her in, long lashes hiding the eyes taking their luxurious time roaming over Max's equally new look.

It's a little bit sad how Max's limbs sag with relief when Jane nods, squeezing Max's biceps before meeting her eyes again. "Who knew you could clean up so nice," she teases, and Max gives her the eyeroll and scowl she's looking for, butterflies erupting obnoxiously in her stomach despite her outward reaction.

Max didn't own anything remotely suitable for passing herself off as good enough for Jane, but they'd been wearing each other's clothes for years, so much that Max was positive half the battered old flannels and cuffed jeans in her closet had originally been from Jane's infrequent thrift store runs. The second she had managed to peel herself off of hugging Max after the redhead had agreed to this trainwreck waiting to happen, Jane had torn apart her closet, throwing jackets and trousers each probably worth more than Max's mother's mortgage onto her bed to plan out Max's outfits for their visit. Max had been secretly grateful, having little to know fashion sense at the best of times, and had followed Jane's instructions to the letter and dressed in her first costume of the trip, a silk blue blouse and tight black professional trousers with flat ankle boots. She feels less like herself than Jane looks, but if it would help Jane escape her

father's clutches she would have worn a potato sack.

"I'll miss my 90s-kid badass skateboarder, but this will do for now," Jane continues with a laugh, and hooks her arm with Max's as she starts to pull both the woman and her suitcase towards the car. Max feels a little like she's just been hit in the back of the head with a baseball bat, and she lets herself be lead to the car, head spinning with the realization that Jane has seen her dressed in finer clothes than anyone she knows will ever touch and still prefers Max in her comfortable, mis-matched clothing.

"Hey," she says, grinning much wider than the situation calls for, "The 90s are coming back."

"Mike says you've been saying that since middle school," Jane laughs, and swings herself into the driver's seat.

They fall into easy conversation as they drive, teasing back and forth and laughing so loudly Max can almost ignore the obnoxious Christmas songs piping quietly through the car. It's so comfortable and normal for the first few hours that Max almost forgets where they're going until she finishes a ridiculous story about something her housemates had done a few days ago and Jane doesn't laugh. Max looks over to see her knuckles white on the wheel, shoulders hunched as she stares straight ahead at the road. Her eyes are dull, and Max's heart flutters in panic and she reaches out before she can think better of it, covering one of Jane's cold hands with her own.

"Hey," she says softly. "You okay?"

Jane looks over at her, and she seems to be considering for a long moment before she shakes her head shortly. "Can you drive?" she asks, quiet, the car decelerating before she finishes her sentence.

"Yeah, babe, of course." Max is out of the car before it rolls to a stop completely, and she runs her fingers across Jane's forearm as they pass each other to switch seats. By the time Jane is collapsing into the passenger's seat her expression has cleared, but she keeps her gaze on her knees as Max starts up the engine again and pulls back onto the country road.

“Ellie,” Max says. This makes Jane look up quickly, and Max catches and hold her eyes, hoping her smile is less anxious than she feels. “We’re going to rock this.”

Jane’s lips twitch, and she turns away to smile down at her knees. “You think this is a bullshit plan.”

“Yeah, but you think it’ll work, and I’ve learned to run with your crazy plans,” Max says, flashing her a grin as she glances away reluctantly to check the road. Jane snorts, but she leans over to put her head on Max’s shoulder, and Max has to take a moment to violently stamp down the giddiness that always comes with Jane touching her casually before she can continue. “This is just one more step in your grand plan of getting the hell out of there, and you have a perfect track record so far, so you know you’re going to crush this. It’s just a couple of days, and I’m going to be there the whole time. I’m not going to leave your side, so you won’t even have to be alone with him.”

“Promise?” Jane says, voice small.

Max takes one hand off the wheel and holds out her pinky finger. “Promise,” she answers, and Jane giggles as she hooks their pinkies together. She doesn’t let go after they shake, pulling their joined hands into her own lap instead, and Max thinks, a bit hysterically, that Mike should rethink his stance on a “zoomer” Dungeons and Dragons character not having any special powers, since she manages to keep the car driving in a straight line despite this.

They drive in silence for awhile, Jane’s curls tickling Max’s cheek, before Max reluctantly clears her throat. “Um. Babe. I don’t actually know where his house is.”

Jane tenses, and then bursts out laughing. It’s not the loud, shameless cackle which fills the whole room that Max is used to, but her body is shaking with real humor, and Max feels her muscles relax a bit at the sound. “I’ll put my GPS on,” she giggles, and Max’s shoulder and pinky feel strangely cold when she pulls away to dig through her purse. “I can put some music on, too, since I know how much you love my music tastes.”

“Not the 80s synthpop playlist,” Max begs, and the mischievous look Jane shoots her as she angles her phone screen away from Max warms the redhead down to her toes.

They argue over music the rest of the drive, Max dramatically thanking the GPS voice whenever she interrupts Jane's music to give directions, and Jane is emphatically explaining why her snobby British-lady GPS is the sexiest GPS voice when the lady in question announces, “You have reached your destination.”

Jane freezes, all humor draining from her face as she glances quickly out the window, but Max keeps her gaze on her friend's face steady, silently parking the car and holding up one pinky between them.

Jane chews her lip, but she raises one shaking hand and hooks her pinky with Max's.

Jane's father isn't home when they drag their suitcases to the front door, but a stone-faced servant shows them inside, informing them that the doctor will be home for Christmas Eve dinner and whisking their luggage away before they can say thank you. Jane immediately drags her up the marble staircase to give her a tour, and Max's head spins, taking in the grand Turkish carpets and oil paintings lining the walls like she's on a tour of Buckingham Palace. She'd known Jane's father was rich, but she has a hard time imagining baby Jane running up and down these halls; Jane was a force of nature, bold and strong and brightening everything she touched, and the cold, echoing hallways she now led Max down looked as if it had never seen human life at all.

“And this is my old room,” Jane says what must be hours later, pushing open a heavy oak door. Max steps in after her and almost trips over their suitcases. “Guess you're sleeping in here too,” Jane grins.

Max pointedly ignores that piece of information and looks around the room. The bed is huge, a grand four-poster with gauzy curtains and a carved headboard that must be a hundred years old, but the room is barren, pale pink walls untouched except for a large painting of young

Jane and an older, imposing man, and a cluster of glossy photographs taped beside the headboard. There is an antique desk and chair, a simple shelf overflowing with trophies and awards, and nothing else, and Max's steps echo on the hardwood floor as she walks slowly into the center of the room, a sick feeling sinking in her stomach.

"Is that your dad?" she asks, pointing to the painting. It faces the bed, the gilded frame glimmering in the fading light, and Max imagines Jane waking up to see it staring down at her every morning.

"Yep," Jane says, popping the 'p' at the end of the word. She grabs the handles on each suitcase and rolls them further into the room, not looking at the painting. "He had that commissioned when I was maybe eleven or twelve, and I started really participating in society events with him. I wasn't allowed to have stuff on the walls before that, so I think it was supposed to be a reward."

Max sputters. She thinks of Jane's apartment, and how she'd teased her for ages about being a hoarder, keeping pamphlets and ticket stubs and any knick-knacks she could get her hands on from all the places they'd visited and activities they'd tried over the years. "This is *after* decorations?"

Jane smiles at her without humour and sits on the bed, bouncing a little with the movement. "Just how I left it," she says flatly.

Max wanders over to the cluster of photographs on the opposite end of the headboard from Jane, curious. They're all of older teenagers and young adults of varying age lined up around younger Jane, standing rigidly with frozen smiles on their faces as they stared directly into the camera. Max thinks she recognizes one girl, a pretty woman with dark skin and flawless, thick hair flowing down her back, and when she leans in with a frown Jane says, "Those are my foster brothers and sisters. The ones Papa adopted before me. I was allowed to hang approved pictures on my wall for motivation when I got accepted into university." She crawls across the mattress noisily and leans over to peer at the pictures too, a smirk forming on her face as she taps the one Max is studying. "Though I'm surprised this one's still up, considering Kali's elaborate escape."

The name finally triggers the memory, and Max turns to Jane, mouth

agape. "The chick who brought us to that underground punk concert where we almost got killed in the pit?"

Jane laughs, looking at the picture affectionately. "Yeah, but she got us out okay. I haven't seen her since -" She stops talking abruptly and looks away from the photograph, hands clenching on the crease of her navy blue suit trousers.

Max knows why. Kali had quit the high-powered job Brenner had secured for her and ran away to Jane's, begging the younger girl to join her before disappearing when some politically-powerful friends of Dr. Brenner's had appeared at Jane's front door. She was still, as far as any of them knew, on the run, Dr. Brenner's contacts in every city keeping a watchful eye for her. Max wasn't sure what Dr. Brenner and his friends could do if they did find her, powerfully-connected or not, but it was enough that Kali remained underground, and had abandoned everything about her old life for her freedom. Like Max was helping Jane prepare to do after graduation.

Max swallows.

A quiet knocking on the heavy bedroom door makes them both jump skittishly.

"Dr. Brenner has arrived and is waiting in the foyer," a monotone voice calls through the door. "Dinner will be served in half an hour."

Max looks at Jane. Sighing, the taller girl flows off the bed gracefully, meeting Max's eyes and holding out her hand as she stands on steady feet. Her eyes are dull and glazed again, and Max's heart twinges with anxiety as she weaves their fingers together.

"Showtime," Jane says softly.

Dr. Brenner is waiting for them at the bottom of the marble staircase. He has a few more lines on his face, but Max recognizes the stoic look of vague disapproval from the painting hanging opposite of Jane's old bed as they descend the stairs hand-in-hand. He says nothing as they reach the bottom step, eyes lingering first on Jane

and then Max long enough to let them feel thoroughly judged, and Jane breaks the silence first, gazing up at him from beneath her long lashes. "Hello, Papa. Merry Christmas."

"It is not yet Christmas," Dr. Brenner says. Jane doesn't react, but Max has a difficult time keeping her flash of annoyance off of her face. "Even away at college I expect you to use only the words you mean. How were your exams? You did not send me a final progress report when I was away."

"I am sorry, Papa," Jane says softly. "They went well. I feel I know the material, and it is information I will retain for when I start practising medicine. I simply ran out of time when Rebecca and I had to rearrange our plans, because we both found our true partners." She turns and smiles at Max, and Max's eyes widen, grip tightening on Jane's hand as she tries not to look like a deer in headlights. They'd had a vague discussion of what they should do to appear like a believable couple, but Max hadn't been prepared to jump into declaring her love before she declared her name, right here in the foyer. Her body didn't quite know how to react to hearing the woman she loved call her her "true partner;" the galloping of her heart at any scrap of affection from Jane was familiar, but the lack of light behind Jane's eyes leaves her as cold as Dr. Brenner's disposition, and the smile she manages to find for her best friend is shaky.

"Yes," Dr. Brenner says. Max glances back at him nervously; he was still frowning slightly at Jane. "Do not let your partners affect your work ethic in the future. And you are?" he adds abruptly, and Max doesn't catch herself this time before she jumps.

She feels the flash of annoyance again; Jane had called him last night to inform him of their "relationship," and prevent any awkward meetings with the other woman Jane had previously been supposed to be married off to, and Max was certain Jane would have mentioned her name. "Maxine Mayfield," she says clearly, stepping forward with one hand outstretched. Jane is still attached to her other hand, but the taller girl sweeps forward with the grace of a debutante, and Max feverishly envies her lack of awkwardness under pressure as she holds Dr. Brenner's eyes resolutely, sticking her free hand up to his chest.

Dr. Brenner glances down at her outstretched hand for a moment too long before taking it in his own. "Pleased to meet you," he says, and Max has to clench her teeth to keep herself from blurting out that he should *only use words he means*. This was going to be a long two days. "And you are Jane's new girlfriend," he continues, dropping her hand and peering down at her with his icy blue eyes.

"Yes," Max says, a little bit defensively. "I love her. I mean, we love each other."

There's an eternity of a moment where her words echo in my marble foyer and Dr. Brenner looks at her, eyebrows raised, and then Jane says, "Maxine is the Undergraduate Board of Governors Representative for the Student Union, and has passed many movements to put medical specialists on Biology grant panels over the years."

This is a lie; Max had majored in Computer Science, mostly because she was good at it and it was one of the few majors where she would probably get a job after graduation, and had no idea what the university government was, much less how it worked. Jane had decided that she needed a backstory to rival Rebecca's if she was to distract Dr. Brenner from promising Jane to the Dean's daughter, and had invented an influential position within the confusing hierarchy of university boards to impress her father. Jane was usually a terrible liar, so Max had agreed to be the one to spout her story, but under the piercing blue gaze of Dr. Brenner she suddenly understood why Jane always collapsed from guilt and anxiety in the middle of a lie. She had saved Max from her stumble, however, when Max was supposed to be saving her, so Max clears her throat and says, "That's right, sir, it's important to find the right people to handle grants so that the right work gets done."

Dr. Brenner arches an eyebrow, but he only says, "Indeed. Well, I am going to change after my long trip. I look forward to hearing more about your position over dinner. Jane, show your guest to the dining room." With a whirl of his long coat he sweeps up the marble staircase and away from them.

Jane exhales a shaky breath beside her. Max watches until he turns a corner and disappears from sight, and then immediately turns to her

best friend, taking her other hand and leaning up to press their foreheads together. "You lived with that for eighteen years?" She wants to punch through a priceless oil painting after a short conversation with him.

Jane's eyes are closed, and she shuffles closer to Max's body. "He gets much worse," she grounds out, and Max knows she's losing her words again.

"I believe it." Max rubs her thumbs across Jane's knuckles, staring at the shadows Jane's long lashes make against her cheeks reverently. "But you have me now, and no one is a more obnoxious distraction for assholes. Except maybe Dustin."

Jane sniffs and giggles. "Supposed to like you."

"Well I think that ship has sailed, but hopefully I can still sell him on this student board thing. Think about that, can you go over the plan with me again?" She's pretty sure she remembers all she's ever going to remember about boards and grants, but planning helps Jane's anxiety, and Max wants to get her out of the black hole talking with her father always traps her mind into. She walks Jane to the dining room as the taller girl finds her words, remembering the path from her tour of the house, and by the time Dr. Brenner joins them, dressed sharply in a different suit than he'd left in, Jane is forming full sentences again.

Their giggling is cut off as he scrapes his chair away from the table; Max suspects he does this purposefully to gain their attention. Jane sit up like she has a measuring stick against her back, and Max hides a sigh in a gulp of water as servants begin to bring in the first dinner course. Max diverts the conversation away from Jane as much as possible, and by the time dessert is being presented to them on gold leaf-gilded plates Dr. Brenner is leaning forward slightly in his seat as Max prattles on with big words she hopes sound official and important.

"Fascinating," Dr. Brenner says, and though his voice is flat Jane grips her forearm with cold fingers, and she thinks it may be a victory. "You sound like a very good friend to have, Maxine. Join me in the parlor for port?" He raises his voice at the end, but Max knows

it's not a request. She looks down at her cake longingly, but she rises only a split-second after Jane does and reaches behind her automatically for her best friend's hand. Jane slips her pinky finger into Max's, and Max grins all the way to the parlor.

Dr. Brenner is standing by the window when they trail in, gazing out at the falling snow. He already has a short, round glass in his hand, filled with deep red liquid he gently sloshes from side to side, and a servant is pouring two more glasses on the antique coffee table in the middle of the room. Jane mouths *Small sip* to her, and she eyes her friend warily as she picks up the glasses and passes one over to Jane. Max takes the smallest sip she can as Brenner turns to her, and it takes every single muscle in her face to not scrunch up her features in disgust as she tastes port for the first time. Jane squeezes her pinky, and she knows her friend is laughing at her.

"So, Maxine," Dr. Brenner begins, one hand in his trouser pocket in a gesture that would look casual on anyone else. "You are making decisions that will affect scientists's careers forever before you have even graduated. What influences do you have outside of your own college boards?"

"The scientists I meet," Max says carefully. Jane squeezes her pinky again, and she ploughs forward, bolstered. "As a student, I have a unique opportunity to find rising stars before other colleges snatch them up. And we meet with other members from other boards, as well as representatives from the government."

"Indeed," Dr. Brenner says, and takes a sip of port. "But Jane is going to be back here in Indiana after graduation. What contacts do you have outside of your own college?"

His eyes are sharp and challenging, and Max's lies die on her lips. She flounders, confused. "I've only just started in the community -"

"Rebecca Gilmour had contacts all over the country, as well as in China," Dr. Brenner says. "Emily Richardson will replace her father as Dean of Medical Sciences when he is ready to retire. What. Contacts. Do. You. Have?"

Max hasn't felt her mind blank with rage since she'd left her abusive

step-father's house. She finally understands what this is all about; he sees Jane as a commodity, a poker chip to get him into the secret, higher-stakes games, and he's asking Max to beat the highest bid for her. She opens her mouth to tell him exactly what she thinks of *that* when Jane wraps her hands around one of Max's and steps up right behind her, and her breath is on Max's neck as she says, "Papa, please _."

"Jane, you know better than to interrupt," Dr. Brenner says, not taking his eyes off of Max.

"Think of when I moved away," Jane blurts out.

Dr. Brenner glances at her. Max takes a deep breath, letting Jane's scent wash over her and extinguish the fire raging through her core.

Jane is clearly struggling to speak, but she ducks her head and ploughs on, and Max falls in love with her bravery all over again. "You said. When I moved. You said I would meet new people. Make contacts. Outside of yours. It was a good thing. Max – Maxine will meet your scientists, and assess them. And bring you new ones. Like you wanted from Illinois."

The room is silent for a moment, Dr. Brenner swirling his port and staring at Jane avoiding eye contact with him. Max squeezes Jane's hands, bursting with pride, and says to her father, "That's true, sir. I'm also an outsider, so I would have an easier time finding weak links and meeting new people here. And I would bring everyone from Illinois with me."

Dr. Brenner pauses before saying, "You know how to use full sentences, Jane," and then turning to Max, either ignoring her reignited fuming or oblivious to it. "That is something to think about. I will sleep on it, and we will discuss this at Christmas dinner. I expect you two to go to sleep at a reasonable time. Good night." Without another glance in their direction, he sweeps past them and out the door.

Max feels like she exhales for the first time since reaching the parlor. "What the actual, genuine, certified *fuck*."

Jane turns her around silently and falls into her arms. Max pulls her closer, stroking her back soothingly, but Jane isn't shaking with sobs like she expects; the taller girl breathes deeply before she whispers, "Thank you, Max. You're my best friend."

"I know," Max whispers back. "We're going to get you away from this insanity, I promise."

"I know," Jane whispers back. They stay like this for awhile, swaying back and forth in silence, until Jane finally draws back enough to hook both her pinkies with both of Max's. Max grins, opening her mouth to say something stupid to make her best friend laugh, when Jane's eyes widen and she leans forward, pressing her mouth to Max's.

Max stares at her, or the blur of her eyebrow and forehead that she can see, feeling for the second time that day like someone has hit her in the back of the head with a baseball bat. It's a pretty innocent kiss, just the touch of Jane's lips to hers, but the devastating heat, so different than the furious fire she's so used to feeling, pipes through her body and dissolves her bones, and she wonders, vaguely, how she is still standing. Her eyes drift closed of their own accord, and she lifts one hand to cradle Jane's cheek reverently, chasing her lips when they try to pull away. She tastes like port and ranch salad dressing and a wet, earthy taste that is all Jane, and Max is drunk on all of it, toes curling in the seam of the hardwood floor as Jane presses a lingering kiss on her bottom lip and slips out of her grasp.

"I hope you are not making unnecessary public displays of affection at school, Jane," Dr. Brenner's voice says.

Max's eyes pop open. Jane is half-turned towards him, and Max can't see her expression. Intoxicated and greedy, Max adds "Distracts Jane from looking at her" to her long list of reasons to hate Dr. Brenner.

"No, Papa," Jane says softly.

Dr. Brenner turns and begins walking up the staircase, the neck of a bottle of port pinched between his long fingers. Jane watches him for a long moment, then turns back to Max, eyes as bright as Max has ever seen them. "I think he bought it," she whispers excitedly.

“What?” Max's head is still spinning, and she really wants to stop talking and kiss Jane again. She grabs Jane's free hand, the one she'd abandoned to caress her cheek, and Jane smiles as their fingers weave together.

“The kiss,” Jane continues. “I think it really sealed it. He doesn't approve of *affection*, obviously, but he was getting suspicious and I think it got us back on track. Sorry if it was too sudden, Rebecca and I used to do that sometimes so I just went for it.”

“What?” Max says again. The heat is beginning to seep from her body, and her mind is in overdrive, running through the past few minutes like she's rewinding an ancient VHS tape. Jane being upset. Jane's eyes widening before she kissed Max. Jane kissing Rebecca. Dr. Brenner seeing Jane kissing Rebecca. Dr. Brenner walking away with a port bottle. The port bottle no longer being in the parlor where they are standing.

Where they had just kissed.

Max's stomach frosts over.

“He gets so suspicious,” Jane is saying with a frown, playing with Max's fingers absently. “If he suspects anything about my relationships are fake he'll just figure the whole thing out. It's terrifying.” She steps closer, pressing their foreheads together, and Max can't stop herself from flinching. “Max?”

“Sorry.” Max steps away, avoiding her eyes. “That was some quick thinking. Both with the bringing-in-people thing and the – the k-kiss. You barely even need me for this plan.” She had meant it as a joke, but bitterness sours her tone. She pulls Jane by their joined hands, heading for the marble staircase, and Jane stumbles a little behind her this time.

“Of course I need you,” Jane says, and her voice is so genuine Max closes her eyes for a second. “I couldn't do any of this without you – Max? Are you okay? Look at me.” She tugs Max to a stop at the top of the stairs, and although it hurts more than anything Max has endured in her short but turbulent life, her eyes rise to Jane's like a sunflower to the sun.

"No, of course I'm okay," Max says, attempting a grin as she pulls one hand away to swat Jane's shoulder. Jane stares at her, and Max rolls her eyes at herself and looks away again. "I'm just... Tired. It's been a long day. And I don't think port agrees with me."

"You only had one sip. Was the kiss too weird? I won't do it again if you don't want me to."

For the first time in her life, the flare of anger in her core is at Jane. She runs her free hand over her face and snorts, jaw clenching as she tries to beat it back down. "If I don't want you to, right," she mumbles, and then turns away and starts down the hall before she can say anything else incriminating. "No, it did what it was supposed to do," she says, the fire inside of her roaring vindictively when she hears Jane scramble to follow her down the hall. "Yeah, your plan is working really well so far, so it's all good, really."

"Keep your voice down," Jane hisses, catching up and falling into step beside her. Max is both relieved and disappointed when the other girl doesn't try to take her hand again. "What are you doing? Are you mad at the plan?"

"I told you I didn't want to do your stupid plan," Max snaps. She ducks her head and tries to speed up her steps, even though Jane's legs are longer. "And yet here I am, doing your stupid plan. Like always."

"What are you talking about?" Jane says, bewildered. "You said you would help me."

Max barks out a laugh, incredulous. The anger is fuelling her now; this isn't what she's really upset about, and she knows it, but it feels good to let it burn. "Yeah, I always say I'll help you," she snaps. "And here I am, dressed like a frilly douche, helping you when you couldn't give a shit -"

"Max, I care about you more than anyone!" Jane says, and her voice wavers. "You're my best friend."

She's furious that Jane won't fight back, that Jane is right, that Jane can say all the right things but rip her heart out of her chest without

even knowing it, and she explodes, the anger ravaging her like a forest fire, “My best friend who doesn't even notice I'm in love with you!”

It takes her a couple of angry steps to realize what she's just said; it takes a couple more wobbling steps to realize Jane is no longer beside her. She has never wanted to look at Jane less in her life, but she forces herself to turn around, her eyes reluctantly rising up Jane's tensed body to meet her wild gaze. They stare at each other for an eternity of a moment, frozen, and then at the same time they blurt out several words on top of each other.

“I didn't mean -”

“Like *love-love*, or -”

They both freeze again, like someone has pressed pause, and then Jane says, hesitantly, “You never said anything.”

“No.” Max says, looking down at her feet and scratching the back of her neck awkwardly. “You were – You're so crazy out of my league, and you always said you would never fall in love, anyway. And, being here in this house, I get that.” She smiles to show she means it, but Jane doesn't return the gesture. “I was just pissed off earlier, you know I say dumb shit when I'm mad.”

“Are you really angry about helping me with the plan?” Jane asks, voice shaking.

“No, Jane, no.” Max makes to take a step forward automatically, but she thinks better of it and shoves her hands into her pockets, face flaming. “I was just mad about the kiss, but I couldn't tell you that so I made it about the wrong thing. It was dumb.”

“The kiss?” Jane says, confused, and then her eyes widen comically. “Oh. Because I kissed you and you love me. And you thought I was kissing - and then I said it was because of Papa. Oh, Max -”

“Don't.” Max holds up a hand, looking resolutely down at her feet. She can't take Jane's pity, or sympathetic let-down, right now, or perhaps ever. She blinks away tears and turns away, pretending to

look down the hallway away from who she hopes is still her best friend. “Just... Don't, Jane. I didn't want to bring it up, and I don't want to talk about it. I'm sorry I yelled.”

“But -” Jane starts.

“No,” Max says emphatically. “I knew how this would turn out, which is why I didn't want to say anything. You don't have to tell me. I get it. I'm going to find another room to sleep in tonight.”

“Max,” Jane says, tears in her voice, but, in another of all the firsts for them happening tonight, Max walks away from Jane while she cries.

Notes for the Chapter:

Me, reading this trope, knowing they always get together in the end But will they still get together in the end???

Merry Christmas if you celebrate!!!!!!

3. Chapter 3

Notes for the Chapter:

So mt gf pointed out to me that I didn't use any trigger warning tags originally, so warning for emotional and psychological parental abuse!!! This chapter gets a lot more intense for that (the DRAMA) but I'm sorry for not putting that up earlier!!!
Hope you're still in the mood for Christmas because wow this took forever

Snow had drifted, soft and lazy, over the vast grounds of the mansion all night.

Max has been awake to watch it. In the first empty room with a bed she'd stumbled across, after opening several doors and wondering with growing hysteria how many offices a house with one person living in it needs, she has sat up all night, staring as the the fluffy snow gathers on the trellis covering the window. Her eyes had burned as the rising sun had reflected off of the white surface, glowing orange and pink as the daylight poured into the vast room, as sparsely-decorated as the room Jane had lived in for her whole childhood, but Max hadn't looked away.

Jane had knocked on her door around midnight, her soft voice begging Max to let her in, but Max had kept staring out the window mutely, mind carefully kept as blank as the fresh blanket of snow, and Jane had eventually given up, shuffling away and not returning for the rest of the night. A servant had knocked on Max's door in the morning, bustling in before Max could say anything and laying a tray of every kind of breakfast food Max could have imagined at the foot of her bed. He had explained that Dr. Brenner had left to check in at his laboratory and would be back for Christmas dinner, and had swept out of the room before the pause in conversation Max wasn't about to fill became too pronounced. No one bothered her after that, which she was grateful for. She'd scuttled down the bed to pick at the overflowing tray, but everything sat heavy and leaden in her stomach, and she'd ended up crawling back up to the window, curling her aching body around her bent knees and staring out at the

snow falling picturesquely over the mansion grounds, and she hasn't moved since.

The one thing, the single part of her she'd promised to keep hidden away from Jane, and she'd thrown it in her friend's face when Jane had needed her most. Max can barely remember why she was so angry, now; the emotion seemed to need so much energy than she could ever have had, so much more substance than the empty, aching hole that was her core now seemed capable of. The anger, the humiliation, the absence of Jane, seemed to be physical injuries now, and her body feels heavier than her bones are able to hold up. She wants to hate Jane, for the kiss, for being so oblivious to her feelings that she'd forced Max into a charade that put them on display, but she can't, and it makes her sick to her stomach. No matter what Jane does, no matter how careful Max is, no matter how many excuses she can make or what her friends and co-workers and her own brain warn her, she will keep loving Jane, and Jane will always react like she had in the hallway. The expression is burned into Max's mind, and she wishes, darkly, as she watches Dr. Brenner's car glide up the snow-dusted drive as the sun sets, that she could cut this part of herself out of her, could take her overeager heart and walk away from her best friend, from the embarrassment and hopefulness and *wanting* that keeps her tethered to Jane. She watches the snow drift and thinks of ignoring summons to Christmas dinner, waiting for darkness to fall, and walking past Jane's bedroom as she heads downstairs to walk out the front door.

But as Max looks around the bedroom, barely distinguishable from Jane's childhood room, she knows she wouldn't let Jane face her father alone. No matter the ache in her chest that rattled her breaths, no matter the pink flush of humiliation she was sure would never fade from her freckled skin, no matter the base terror underneath all the hurt and agony that made her wonder if her best friend would ever meet her eyes again, Max knows she is going to force her frozen body to move off of the bed, hold her head high, and stand strong beside Jane, just like she has always done. Just like she has always wanted to do.

I would do anything for you, Ellie.

Max closes her eyes for a long moment, letting the sunset reflecting

off of the snow burn behind her eyelids, and rolls off the bed.

Jane is already waiting at the bottom of the staircase once Max has stolen into her room and changed into her costume for the day; she stands ramrod straight as she watches the door. Max pads down the stairs and slips up behind her, hooking one limp pinkie with her own. Jane jumps, jittery as a mouse, but when she turns and sees Max the smile which splits her face is blinding, and Max allows herself to be dazzled, eyes burning as if she's still staring into the sun. She swings their pinkies and squeezes, not trusting her voice even if she had any idea what to say; Jane beams and begins to open her mouth, and Max is just starting to allow the pathetic hope that they might be okay to grow in her chest when the door opens.

Dr. Brenner walks in, pulling a dark red wool scarf from around his neck. He eyes them silently, then turns to the servant waiting at his side and begins to shrug off his coat. "Merry Christmas, Jane, Maxine. I trust you've spent the day productively."

"Merry Christmas, Papa," Jane says softly, and Max echoes her, choosing not to vocalize how unproductive her day has been. "Very much so. Thank you for the gifts, they will be very useful for my studies."

Max wonders idly what kinds of gifts Dr. Brenner would deem useful enough to give to Jane as he nods and shoos the servant away silently. She then thinks of Jane, sitting alone in the parlor opening impersonal presents by herself when Max had promised she wouldn't leave her side, and her stomach twists with agony.

"I will change and meet you for Christmas dinner," Dr. Brenner says. "We have much to discuss."

Max's heart speeds up at this ominous phrasing, but Jane simply nods her head, stepping aside as Dr. Brenner sweeps past them and up the stairs. Silently, they begin walking towards the dining room pinkie-in-pinkie, but Max can't help but glance over her shoulder to see Dr. Brenner's coattails swish around the corner and out of sight.

They're quiet as they walk together to the elaborately-decorated table, but as soon as they sit down Jane blurts out, as if she's been

waiting to burst, "Max -"

"Hey," Max says softly. She raises their joined hands to rest on the table and envelops Jane's hand with her own, ignoring the dirty looks from the servants bustling around them trying to fit more dishes of food of the table. "I'm so sorry, about how I acted last night, and leaving you alone today."

Jane blinks; her pink mouth works for a moment in bewilderment, and if Max's stomach hadn't been twisted in knots she would have been mesmerized, now that she knows what it feels like. "What? No, I'm sorry, I didn't think -"

"Exactly," Max interrupts. Jane tries to take every bad thing that's ever happened around her and carry it on her shoulders, and once she's built up momentum it's almost impossible to stop her. "You didn't think anything of it, and you had no reason to. I was the one who did. I never wanted to put my feelings on you, so you had no way of knowing. I overreacted, and I'm sorry."

Jane shakes her head, brown eyes wide and miserable. "I would never mean to hurt you, Max," she whispers.

"I know." Max squeezes her hand, gently, the opposite of the squeezing of her own heart as she carefully chooses her next words. She needed to address all of Jane's guilt, not just her worry about the fight. "I've always known you couldn't return my feelings. It's never been a problem before, and I promise you it's not going to be ever again. You're my best friend, Ellie."

Jane's eyes soften at her nickname, but she pauses and then glances away, thumb stroking the back of Max's hand almost thoughtfully. "I -"

"We will take a red wine to pair with the dark meat," Dr. Brenner says as he swoops into the dining room, apparently speaking to the room at large. Max jerks her hand away from Jane guiltily, as if they were caught doing something untoward, although she supposes it would help with their cover story if they had been, as Jane had demonstrated last night. Dr. Brenner sits regally in his seat at the head of the table and accepts a glass of red wine from a servant, and

Max and Jane silently pick up their cutlery only after he does.

The room is tensely silent besides the scraping of cutlery on plates. Max glances at Jane, sawing through her turkey in as lady-like a way as she can, but her best friend has her head bowed, cheeks pink as she chews delicately and stares resolutely down at her plate. Max's stomach twists with anxiety, the dark meat she's managed to swallow fighting its way back up her throat, but she shoves another chunk of turkey into her mouth and says nothing; Jane has bigger things to worry about today than reassuring Max, and as Max glances at Dr. Brenner, his ice blue eyes focused unblinkingly on Jane over the rim of his wine glass, Max resolves to swallow her selfishness with the slice of turkey and re-focus on what she came here to do.

Finally Jane speaks, keeping her eyes on her carefully-separated potatoes and carrots. "How was your time at the lab today, Papa?"

"Very productive," Dr. Brenner says, and Max has to fight not to roll her eyes. "I learned something very interesting, actually."

"Oh?" Jane says politely, curls tumbling over the back of her neck as she tilts her head in feigned interest.

"Yes," Dr. Brenner says. "I learned that Maxine Mayfeild is a Computer Science major from a lower-middle-class family with no extracurriculars and no contacts."

The room freezes. Max looks immediately at Jane; the brunette is finally looking up at her father, hands hovering over her plate as she clutches her knife and fork mid-bite. Her mouth is gaping, panic clouding her eyes as her tensed body shakes, and Max is on her feet before she realizes what she's doing, chair scraping and clattering to the floor. Dr. Brenner chuckles, but Max can't look away from Jane, shoulders squaring into a defensive pose without a thought.

"Did you really think you could lie to me, Eleven?" Dr. Brenner has a smile in his voice, and his tone is almost pitying. Jane still doesn't react, although a glob of cranberry sauce drips from her fork as her hands shake at the sound of her other name. "I have taught you your whole life that being connected is everything, that nobody can ever stop your ambitions if you have right people on your side, and yet

you think I would not immediately use mine to check into your newest partner at a pinnacle point in your career. I am disappointed, Eleven, but I am not surprised. Luckily you will learn the value of networking when you marry Emily."

"You can't do that!" Max snaps. Her hands are shaking as hard as Jane's, but it's with rage instead of fear. Her head snaps around to look at Dr. Brenner, barely able to keep herself from leaping over the table at him when she sees the small smile on his face. "There's no way you can legally force her to marry someone, she's an adult!"

"She and I both know I can," Dr. Brenner says quietly, not taking his eyes off of Jane. "As for you, Ms. 'Max' Mayfeild of B- average and dollar store cashier fame, you will leave my house immediately. You will not speak to, discuss, or *think* of my daughter again, and you will never tell anyone about having set foot on my property."

"What are you going to do about it, throw me out?" Max snarls. "Because square up, old man, you'll have to go through me to get to Jane. We're leaving, right now, and there's nothing you can do to make Jane marry anyone or stay in this freak show of a house for another second!"

"Yes, that was what made me doubt my initial suspicions, at least for a moment," Dr. Brenner muses, and he has something too close to pride in his eyes as he watches Jane now, swirling his wine in his glass. "She brought someone who *actually* loved her for her charade, though she did not use it to its full potential."

Max flushes; she glances quickly at Jane, but the other girl is so sickly pale, and she hurries to get herself back on track. "Yeah, well, you're the only one disturbed enough to use that kind of shit against people. Jane isn't like you, and she'll never be like you. She's a better person than you can even -"

"She is whoever I decide she is," Dr. Brenner says over her, and then continues, taking advantage of Max's vision whiting out with rage, "Eleven, if you walk out that door right now, the car you drove here in will be reported stolen. You will be apprehended by the police, who will be looking for Maxine Mayfield, who has kidnapped the promising young daughter of influential Dr. Martin Brenner, *who* will

be putting great pressure on his close personal friend the Police Commander and several local senators looking for donations for their upcoming campaigns, to prosecute her to the full extent of the law. You will be escorted home by the police while she is taken to prison, and you will not leave the grounds until your nerves have calmed enough from the incident that you no longer insist that Maxine Mayfield is innocent and you went willingly."

He is speaking so calmly, almost kindly, as if Jane is a small child and he's explaining that she doesn't get to eat her pudding because she hadn't finished her peas. Max's ears are ringing; she doesn't realize how long she's been standing, a statue of horror and rage, until Jane sputters behind her, "Papa - n-no- Not Max - She didn't do anything -"

"That is what happens when you disobey me, Eleven," Dr. Brenner says, and his voice is heavy, like he hates to hurt her but has no choice. "You know this. I have shown you time and time again, and yet you rebel. It is your selfishness that is hurting her, not me."

It is the reference to this being Jane's whole life, this manipulation and control and sick mind game where he's able to twist his tortures around to be her fault, that bring Max back to herself. She comes to life at once, reaching for her wine glass without thinking and throwing it as hard as she can at the wall behind Dr. Brenner's head. She doesn't see whether she hits him, because in the ensuing confusion she grabs Jane's hand and bolts as fast as she can towards the door.

Jane is tripping and stumbling behind her, but she keeps running blindly, barrelling out the door and through the snow like a rabbit with coyotes snapping at its heels. They don't have shoes, or coats, and Max is only aware that she is crying when the tears begin to freeze her eyelashes shut. The realization makes her slow her steps, and as they pass Jane's parked car the full impact of what she's done hits her, and she's suddenly so weak Jane's furious resistance to her lead knocks her backwards and they both fall into the snow.

"Damn it, Max!" Jane is screeching. Max has never seen her so angry; her face is beet red, and tears pour down her cheeks so forcefully they aren't freezing like Max's are. "God damn it! Why would you do

that!"

Max tries to reach for her, but she jumps to her feet, leaping out of Max's reach like she's been burnt. Her green velvet dress is soaked in patches all over her chest and stomach, and she shivers so violently she almost falls over.

"We have to keep moving, Ellie," Max says softly. Her toes are so cold she can barely stand; she wonders if she has the strength to carry Jane over her shoulder, just until they find a road cleared of snow.

This statement seems to bring Jane back to the matter at hand, and she scowls and shoves Max's shoulders. "What the hell were you thinking? Where are we supposed to go from here?"

"We'll have to find a road," Max says, looking away from her friend to scan the campus. "We can – we'll call a taxi from there. Do you have any neighbours around here that would let us wait at their house? That won't call your dad?"

"No," says Jane mulishly. "And he tracks my phone. And credit cards. Probably yours ever since he found out who you were."

"We'll taxi to the nearest town," says Max, not listening, "and then we'll rent a car -"

"And the cops are waiting at both our houses," Jane says, jumping a little in place to warm herself. "And then what?"

"I don't know," Max moans, "I don't know what to do."

"No," Jane snaps, "because I'm the planner of this relationship, not you and your impulses. And my plan is to stay away from you so that you don't go to *prison* out of *stubbornness*." Her curls bounce righteously as she turns and walks away.

Max's arm shoots out to grab her, panic gripping her tighter than the crushing cold. "Don't tell me you're even *thinking* of going back there -"

"I have to!" Jane shouts, throwing her arms in the air and turning

back around to face Max in exasperation. "I'll rot in that bedroom or marry Emily Richardson or burn the mansion to the ground, but I will not let him ruin your life too!"

"This is insane!" Max shouts back, hands balling into fists as rage pours through her body so hot and fast she doesn't feel the cold any more. "This isn't one of your Gothic novels! You aren't just going to sacrifice yourself, everything you've worked for since I met you! You're better than that, we just need to get you far away enough to -"

"Damn it, Max, why won't you let me protect you too, you stubborn asshole?" Jane screams, balling up her fists too and pounding them against her outer thighs.

"You going back there wouldn't be protecting me!" Max cries. "I would rather die than see you go back there!"

"You'll die in jail if I don't go back there!" Jane yells, and her voice breaks. "Why did I bring you? He would never have known about you if I had just not been selfish for one week-end -" Her body shudders violently, and she stumbles, her frozen hair swinging and smacking her cheeks. "Jesus Christ!" she screams, and then she covers her face with her hands and sobs.

Max's heart breaks. She stands and gathers Jane in her arms, and Jane doesn't fight her this time; hiccuping so helplessly through her sobs she can barely catch her breath, Jane burrows into her friend, soaking Max's blouse with spit and tears as she buries her face in the shorter girl's shoulder. Max strokes her back soothingly, but she can't control her own shaking from the cold and she gives Jane's back a few vigorous rubs before pulling away, tilting Jane's chin to bring those beautiful eyes to meet hers.

"Ellie," Max sighs. "None of this is your fault."

"It is," Jane sniffs. She wipes her nose on her wrist, and Max realizes with a bolt of horror that her dress only has three-quarter sleeves.

"Jesus, Ellie," she mumbles under her breath, and begins taking off her cardigan. "Here, take th-

"Damn it, Max, you're already freezing to death because of me, put your sweater back on," Jane snaps.

"Technically it's your sweater," Max grins. At Jane's deadpan look she rolls her eyes, every inch of her body protesting as she holds out the cardigan and raises her eyebrows. "Nobody's freezing to death, and none of this is your fault. Jesus, you call *me* stubborn."

"You *are* stubborn," Jane says stubbornly. "Look, I can fix this, just let me -"

"No, Ellie," Max says. She looks her best friend right in the eye, and tries not to smile when she scowls back. "It's never been about you protecting me, or me protecting you. We're a team, and we protect each other. That's why I came with you. And I promised I wouldn't leave you alone with him, remember? I don't break promises." She holds up her pinky, hoping the violent shaking of her hand doesn't detract from the message she's trying to convey.

Jane smiles her small, one-sided smile, eyes almost shy as they hold Max's, but she doesn't get a chance to raise her pinky, too, because three police cars come roaring up the driveway, sirens blaring.

Max's heart stops. She and Jane exchange looks of horror before Jane whirls around, opening her arms as if she's trying to shield Max with her body. "Run, I'll hold them off and explain as much as I can before Papa -"

"Ladies, wait!" The officers stream from the cars, most not bothering to shut the doors as they wave their hands. "Jane Brenner and Maxine Mayfield, halt, do not be alarmed -"

"Jane!" calls out a voice, and a dark figure darts out of a police cruiser and over the lawn.

Max feels her jaw drop. Jane says, disbelieving, "Sister?"

Kali scoops Jane up in her arms and spins her around with the first genuine smile Max has ever seen on her face. "Sister," she says matter-of-factly. She sets Jane down and cups her cheek, looking into her eyes seriously. "I'm sorry I couldn't come earlier, I had to make

sure everything was in exact order before I came back, we won't have another – where are your coats?” She frowns at Jane, then at Max, her eyes running down the redhead's quaking body under she reaches the snow and her eyes widen. “Are you out here without *boots*?”

“Ladies,” pants an officer, coming up behind Kali and waving a clipboard in the air. “We're glad you're still here. We need a statement from you.”

“A statement?” Max repeats. Jane looks between Max and Kali, bewildered.

Kali is taking off her long wool coat and wrapping it around Jane's shoulders. “Give her your coat, who knows how long they've been out here,” she snaps at the officer, jerking her chin at Max, and to Max's surprise he does without question. “We can do this inside. Come with me, girls.”

She marches them towards the mansion. Jane throws Max a wild look, and Max begins, “Actually, Kali, we were just -”

“Don't worry,” says Kali confidently. “Jane will want to be here for this.”

She raps on the door. A servant opens it, apparently unshaken by the dozen police officers on the stoop, and Kali says, slowly and clearly, “We have an arrest warrant for Dr. Martin Brenner. If he will not meet us here, we are authorized to search the premises.”

This does get a lifted eyebrow, but Max misses the servant's response because Jane stumbles, knees shaking as a gasp gets strangled in her throat. Max is there immediately, steadying Jane and rubbing up and down the arms of Kali's woollen coat, eyebrows knitting together in concern. Kali drags them over the threshold, and Max has a fleeting suspicion that the older woman's knowing smile might not just be regarding Jane's shock.

It is what she addresses, though. “I've been compiling evidence against him since I went on the run,” she says in a low voice as the police flood around them, shouting orders and stampeding through the mansion. “Not just for my case, but for everything he's done.

Unfortunately now that you, Jane, are of age we can't immediately book him for minor endangerment, but if us experiments come forward and talk about how we grew up, even just a few of us..." She smiles, glowing with hope and confidence, and although they aren't blood related Max sees a flash of resemblance between her and Jane in this. "The more, the better. Of course, he's also being charged with things from the lab, criminal negligence, human rights violations, bribes, but he's always been so sure that we can never catch him for what he did to us, and I'd really like those charges to stick." She grins, showing teeth, and the Kali Max remembers is back.

"Kali." Jane's voice is soft, and when Max looks at her she sees with a jolt of horror that her friend's eyes are wide and glassy. "The Police Commander is his friend. And more. All of them. And politicians... He'll be out by nightfall. And when he is -"

"That, dear sister, is why I stayed in hiding for so long," Kali says, and her grin is a bit smug now. "I didn't just collect evidence against that thing which calls itself our father; I have a file on every one of his friends, too. In fact, we may not have to deal with most of them, because of a scandal that may or may not have made it to the commissioner and brought us a new sheriff. Isn't that right, Hopper?" she adds a little bit louder.

"I'm a chief, lady, show some respect," an older officer grumbles from the doorway to the dining room, adjusting his belt and not bothering to look away from whatever he was inspecting in the room. "Did he throw this wine glass?"

Max and Jane exchange wide-eyed glances. Jane looks at Kali, who smiles and wraps an arm around her shoulder. "We have enough against him, I wouldn't lie to make yourselves look less guilty," she says confidentially. "Not him, but it was thrown in self-defense," she calls to Hopper. "I'm representing these girls, so anything you want to ask them will go through me."

"Representing them against what charges, an invasion of my home?"

Dr. Brenner is standing in the doorway to the parlor, wineglass still in his hand. His face is calm, but his eyes are deadly, and the shiver which runs through Max isn't entirely from the cold winter air still

seeped into her bones.

“Dr. Martin Brenner,” Chief Hopper states, stepping forward and pulling a pair of handcuffs off of his belt, “You are under arrest. You have the right to remain -”

“What is this nonsense?” Dr. Brenner snaps. He doesn't flinch at Hopper's approach, but his eyes flick to the girls huddled by the door. “Kali? You always had a flare for the dramatic. What is the meaning of this?”

“You have the right -”

“Good to see you too, Martin,” Kali says coolly. “I would say I wish it were under better circumstances, but I don't think I've ever been in better circumstances than this one.”

“You have the right to remain silent, and I would recommend it considering -”

“What on Earth do you think you could be charging me with?” Dr. Brenner continues, swirling his wineglass like they're at a dinner party. “Really, if you'd actually paid attention in law school instead of wasting my money on concert tickets and hair dye you would know nothing is going to come of this.”

“That's where you're wrong, Martin,” Kali says with venom in her voice. “I did learn a lot in law school on your dime. And I'm using it to bring down you and your little empire. I'm taking what you made me and using it to destroy you, and you will never hurt a child ever again.” Her arm tightens around Jane's shoulder, and Max has never loved her best friend's sister more.

“Just so you know, I can't actually arrest him until I read through his rights uninterrupted,” Hopper complains.

Kali waves him on with her free hand and turns Jane around, passing her to a police officer hovering near by. “Now make sure these girls find some warm and dry clothes, and we'll take their statements.”

When Max pads into the parlor, aching fingers wrapped around a hot cup of tea, Jane is curled up on the couch, staring at the coffee table with a blanket wrapped around her shoulders. She only looks up when Max sits down next to her, and the smile she gives Max when the redhead runs tea-warmed fingers through her fringe doesn't reach her hazy eyes.

"I didn't plan it like he said I did," she blurts out.

Max blinks. "What?"

"Papa," Jane says. She grimaces and looks down at her hands, and Max puts the mug of tea on the coffee table and pulls the fidgeting fingers into her lap. "He said I brought someone with me who loved me. I didn't plan it that way."

"I know," Max says curiously. It still hurts to hear Jane refer to her love as "Not part of her plan," but after what they'd just went through it didn't feel as Earth-shattering as it had that morning. Jane could be sitting on this couch without her, and the thought makes her so nauseous that she closes her eyes for a moment to re-focus on what Jane is saying now. "You didn't plan for that, but I told you it won't make a difference again."

"No." Jane makes a face, shifting on the couch so that she's facing Max and meeting her eyes resolutely. "I meant that I didn't do it on purpose. I wouldn't use something like that against you."

"Oh." Max plays with her fingers to buy herself some time, blushing. Jane had been forced to relive her life with Dr. Brenner, possibly multiple times, in statements to the police, and the idea that she would come out of that worrying that Max thought badly of her makes warmth glow in the pit of her stomach. "I know. He just said that because he's a psycho."

Jane's lip quirks, and she nods before slipping one hand out of Max's and reaching for the mug of tea. Max lets her have it. "Did they drill you hard too?" Jane sighs.

The police had separated them for their statements. Max had protested, loudly, but Kali had assured her that it would look better

in court, and that they had to do everything perfectly or else Dr. Brenner would walk free. This was the only thing that could have convinced Max to leave Jane's side, and after her brief meeting she had followed Kali to the parlor where Jane was waiting and kept vigil by the door, pacing and jumping whenever she heard a noise. An officer had made her tea to calm her nerves, but she hadn't touched it, and was now glad she hadn't as she watches Jane's face pink with the steam from the mug.

She shrugs at Jane's question. "I didn't exactly have the history with him that you have," she points out. "I told them what happened over the past few days, and what you've told me in the past. Kali said I did okay, and I could add charges against him for slander, or whatever, from when he threatened to frame me."

"Good," Jane says. Her expression is hard, and the mug in her hand rattles. Max rubs the hand she's still holding with her thumb soothingly, and Jane relaxes a bit, though she looks at Max from beneath her lashes. "Do you think this will work?" she asks quietly.

Max sighs. She wants to take Jane in her arms again, but the mug of tea is in the way. "Yeah, I do. Kali seems really prepared, and she's a good lawyer. She wouldn't have come back if she wasn't completely ready for him. She knew what she was facing."

Jane looks down at her mug. "So he's really gone," she whispers.

Max looks at her carefully. "Ellie," she says, and squeezes her hand when the other girl still won't look up at her. "He's really gone."

Jane's hands shake so badly the tea sloshes out onto their legs. Max swears and lurches forward, taking the mug out of her friend's hand and placing it gingerly on the coffee table. When she sits back down Jane looks up at her, and, instead of finding eyes shining with tears like she's expecting, Max finds the radiant light she'd fallen in love with every day over the past four years pouring out of her, the grin on her face so wide she could barely speak when she says, "Max, he's *gone*," and lunges at her.

Max catches her, toppling backwards onto the couch. Jane is giggling, and Max starts too, staring up at the ceiling giddily as they

dissolve into a squirming, cackling pile. After what must be ages, judging from Max's aching stomach, their laughter fades, but they keep lying there, Jane snuggling into the curve of Max's neck, Max letting her arms lie loosely on Jane's back as she stares at the ceiling and smiles.

All at once, Jane springs up on her hands, staring down at Max as she hovers over the shorter girl. "What do I do now?" she asks, worry wrinkling her brow.

Max grins up at her, folding one arm behind her head and drinking her in. "Anything you want," she says.

Jane frowns, like Max is not taking this seriously enough. "No, I mean – do I drop out of school? Is my apartment going to be repossessed? What happens to your money when you go to prison?"

Max shrugs. "Ask Kali. I'm sure she can get you some of his money. Plus, you can always join us mundanes and get a job."

Jane gives her a look, and she laughs, stomach shaking against Jane's and making her a bit dizzy. "I haven't really looked up a lot of financial law recently, but whatever happens, this is the winning scenario, Jane. No looking over your shoulder, no network of superfriends hunting you down. You get the life you've been working towards, the life you chose for yourself and no one else, the life you deserve. And so does he. Which is him getting shanked in jail."

Jane snorts, but she's smiling as she rolls her eyes. She gazes down at Max for a long moment, eyes warm. "The life I choose," she says, softly. "I need to ask you something."

"Sure," Max says, basking in her. Jane is quiet for a long moment, smiling down at her, and then her cheeks heat up, the change so rapid it seems to propel her backwards until she's sitting upright. She looks down to see herself straddling Max and her whole face glows, and she throws herself to the opposite end of the couch, landing painfully on Max's shins as she blushes over the blanket she now has wrapped around half of her face.

"Woah, Jane, Jesus, hang on," Max breathes out, readjusting her

aching legs on either side of Jane's hips and sitting upright, stomach fluttering with concern. "What's up? It's just me."

"Yes," Jane says breathlessly. Her forehead flushes again, and Max falls in love for the thousandth time that day.

"Are you okay?" she asks softly. Jane's hands are hidden beneath the blanket, so she reaches out and squeezes the slipper poking out from beneath her cocoon. "You know you can ask me anything."

Jane's eyes soften. "I know," she says, her voice muffled by the blanket. "You're so good."

Max grins at her. "I am, aren't I?" she says, brushing invisible lint off of her sweater, and she can't regret the dorky move when Jane emerges from her blanket a bit, smiling.

Jane picks at the hem of the blanket, eyes downcast despite the smile still on her lips. "All my life," she says, "I've had things decided for me. I've had a straight path paved for me, and when I rebelled I just turned and ran the opposite direction." She pauses and looks up at Max, her eyes bright and serious. "Marriage – or more accurately life partnership – was always part of the inevitable end I was running away from."

Oh. Max feels all the warmth from the last few minutes leech from her body, and she tries not to let her face fall. She wonders how many times her heart can take going over this in one week-end. "I know, Ellie," she says, trying to smile and failing miserably. "I wasn't trying to -"

Jane stretches out a hand to cover Max's. "Let me talk?" she says, eyes wide and earnest, and Max nods, knowing she's too weak to deny Jane anything, even breaking her heart all over again.

Jane settles back on the couch, but one of her slippered feet slide out from under the blanket and poke Max's. "Running away from it, hating it, was just running backwards on the same path," she says. "I didn't hate it because it wasn't for me, but because it was chosen for me. But now, Papa's gone, and I get to forge my own path." She takes a deep breath and stares resolutely at Max, nervous. "Get it?"

“Um.” Max was too busy trying to stamp down her own feelings of despair and heartache to follow Jane's metaphor, but Jane had used the phrase she hadn't used in their friendship in years, that she only used when she had lost her words so thoroughly she needed Max to come and find her in the labyrinth of her anxiety, and Max begins to try to find her way through without hesitation. “Yeah, you get to make your own path, one you won't hate because you made it,” she says slowly, smiling encouragingly. “That's great, Jane, you have all the possibilities in the world, and I know that sounds scary but you've really already started on your own path, you just get to, like, start setting down stone openly.” She winces at her misuse of Jane's metaphor, hoping her friend won't think she's mocking her.

But Jane leans forward, arms slipping out of the blanket as she slides her hands over Max's, and her gaze finds and holds Max's as she says, slowly, “Now that I get to choose my own path, I can build it to you.”

Max stares at her and stops fidgeting. Stops breathing, too. She can't mean what Max's bruised heart immediately latches onto, but her mind seems suddenly blank of anything else. “W-What do you -” she stutters.

Jane breaks their gaze, smiling shyly down at their touching feet. “I've always been in love with you, Max,” she says, and despite her words getting jumbled just a few minutes ago, this declaration tumbles out of her lips like it's the easiest thing in the world.

Max stares, and stares, and stares, wondering if she'd died on hypothermia a couple of hours ago and heaven was just her greatest fantasies playing out in high definition, and then Jane says, “It just didn't matter,” and Max frowns, because this is still the greatest moment of her life, but now she's convinced it *is* her life, because at no point in all of her deepest, most shame-filled daydreams did she imagine that Jane would say loving her didn't matter.

Jane makes a face again, squeezing her hands before barreling on, “I mean – As long as Papa was... Around, all of my decisions, my goals, my work, was tied to him. Even the plan of getting away from him was built entirely around him, just like Kali's. Even though I knew I would get away, I still wasn't completely free to think about anything of my own, because I was still his. But now I'm mine. Only mine. And

I'm free to love you, and choose you, and follow my path to you, and I do, Max." She looks up and smiles, and never has she looked so blindingly bright. "I love you, and I want to love you."

Max exhales, and laughs, but both get stuck in her throat and she can only make a strangled, unflattering noise. Jane's smile is beginning to turn a little bit uncertain, so Max does the only thing she's sure she's physically capable of doing at the moment and flings herself at her best friend, belly-flopping onto the other girl and sending them tumbling back onto the couch. They're both giggling again, and Max can't catch her breath but is just thinking she's okay going out like this when Jane wriggles around her side and slides on top of her, curls messy and eyes shining.

"That's not an answer," she teases.

"Technically you didn't actually ask me a question," Max points out, barely remembering what they're talking about. She runs her fingers through Jane's hair, trying to take in every detail of this moment. Everything seems more real, the prism of colour reflecting through the window, sharper, the feeling of Jane's pajama bottoms when they brush her stomach where her shirt has ridden up a bit, softer, the contours of Jane's face, that she has mapped and explored with her eyes too many times to count, thrown into sharper relief. She's pretty sure it's not just the oxygen deprivation. Jane huffs, and her chest puffs out dramatically and slides along Max's ribs, and Max loves her, loves her, loves her.

"Max," Jane whines. She tilts her head into Max's hand, and Max somehow feels this throughout her whole body. "You know what I mean."

Max does. She lifts her other hand and slides each over one of Jane's cheeks, drinking her in greedily. "I'm in love with you, Ellie Jane," she breathes, and she finds it does roll off her lips effortlessly. Probably because it's been waiting there for years. "I love you," she says again, because she can, and grins as her thumbs brush reverently over Jane's defined cheekbones. "And I'm honored that your own, personally-forged path could include me."

Jane smiles at her, glowing, and they stay like that for awhile,

pressed against each other, taking it all in. Finally, Max feels as if the question is going to burst out of her mouth if she doesn't say it, so she runs her hand through Jane's curls, purposefully messing them up this time, and says, trying and failing to sound casual, "So, if I'm on your new life path and everything, does that mean we're dating, or...?"

Jane collapses into giggles, flopping down and burying her face in Max's neck. Max can't help but smile, feeling the glee shake the other girl's whole body against hers, but she isn't sure it's a good sign. Finally Jane smiles against her neck, and Max is glad her feet are in slippers so that Jane can't see her toes curl. "I mean, I'm probably going to need some space, since I've only been free of him for a few hours," Jane says with a bit of amusement in her voice, fiddling with the material covering Max's stomach. "And I've never dated anyone properly, anyone I've actually liked, so that's going to take some adjusting. But I want you, Max, and I can't imagine not being with you. I want to date you." She pauses, her foot sliding between Max's shins as she props herself up on her elbow, peering down at Max with concern. "Would you be my girlfriend?"

Max snorts, vaguely aware that she would be floating off the couch right now if she didn't have Jane's weight on top of her. "I mean, I just declared my love for you, a few times, and I was ready to go to prison earlier to get you away from your dickhole father, but, I dunno, being your girlfriend seems like a bit too much commitment -" She's cut off by her own laughter as Jane's fingers dig into her ribs, tickling across the most sensitive parts as she wiggles around half-on top of Max, groaning. They wrestle for a bit, giggling and exchanging empty threats, until Jane ends up straddling her hips, little fingers pinning Max's wrists to the armrest under her head to prevent her from turning the tables and tickling back. Max stares at her, mesmerized, breathing heavy; Jane's hair is tumbling around them, framing both of their faces they're so close, and it feels as if they're in a world all their own.

Jane swallows, still panting slightly, and licks her lips. "If we're girlfriends," she says quietly, "I want to try something. For real."

Max's heart tries to pound its way through her chest to reach Jane. She nods, and, luckily, before any of the desperate words on the tip

of her tongue escape her mouth to express exactly how badly she wants that, too, Jane dips down and kisses her. Max closes her eyes, incapable of anything except *feeling*, and she gasps as Jane kisses her again, and then again, mouth sliding over hers with agonizing pleasure. Each kiss makes her hungrier for another, needy for that dizzying moment of soft, wet lips fitting against hers exactly as she needs them to feel that swooping in her belly, that spinning in her head, that weightlessness throughout every inch of her touching Jane, until they slip away again. She breaks away from Jane's grip on her wrists and weaves her fingers through auburn curls, pulling her close and drowning in her again, and again, and again. Jane gasps and wriggles closer, her breath puffing hotly against Max's open lips, and Max's toes curl so tightly her knees lift a bit.

And then someone is clearing their throat, and Jane is gone.

Max blinks, disoriented. She reaches, stupidly, for Jane again, not processing the interruption, but Jane is sitting up ramrod straight, fists curled in Max's shirt as she whips her head around to look at the intruder, and concern clears some of the cobwebs away in Max's brain. She props herself up on one elbow, the other arm winding loosely around Jane's back as she searches her face worriedly, but a snicker comes from the doorway and she looks over to see Kali, smirking at them from across the room. Max blushes and scowls at her, careful to keep a hand on Jane's back as she pushes herself up into a sitting position, and Jane's body is more relaxed as she turns to smile shyly at Max, her cheeks burning too.

Max frowns at Kali out of the corner of her eye, suddenly much less fond of her despite her heroics, but Kali only jerks her head towards the foyer, smile softening as she takes a step backwards.

"Come along; the police have more work to do here, but you're cleared to pack your things, and I'll drive you home."

She steps out of the room to give them some privacy, though Max expects the hand she can still see tapping casually on the doorframe is to remind them that she's still there and they shouldn't get too distracted. She looks over at Jane, who's already looking at her, and as soon as their eyes meet they burst into giggles, leaning into each other. Jane covers her face with her hands, and Max kisses her

knuckles, because she can.

Reluctantly, she pulls away, planting her feet on the floor and rising with only a small groan. “Come along,” she says, imitating Kali's speech, half to make Jane giggle, half because she knows Kali can hear her.

Jane does giggle, rising to her feet and looking at Max from beneath her eyelashes. “We're going home,” she says, and bites her lip like she's afraid her erupting smile will be too big.

“Yeah,” Max says. She swallows, wondering if she'll ever be able to breathe normally again. She hopes not. “We're going home. Together.” She stretches out her arm, folding all of her fingers except for her pinky into her palm.

Jane smiles at her, bursting with all the light in the universe, and she slides her pinky into Max's as they walk to the door.

Notes for the Chapter:

No shade, I just think Jane needs some space to make emotional decisions for herself once she finally had her freedom. They both proved that they'd be there through anything with no expectations, so I think these crazy kids will be okay. Thank you so much for reading, and making my whole 2017 with kudos and comments!!! I hope everyone had a wonderful holiday, and has a happy new year!

Author's Note:

Part two should be up either later tonight or Christmas day, since I wisely decided to procrastinate a Christmas fic until Christmas eve??? Happy Christmas Eve everyone!!!!!!!!!!